Man — The Crown of Creation or its Destroyer?¹

For many people it is becoming more and more difficult to believe that homo sapiens is the Crown of Creation, given the destructiveness and bestiality of which he is capable. History is a slaughter-house and the century just past was bloodier than all the previous ones. In the course of his evolution, man has developed from inferior life-forms into a civilised being; but woe betide us all when the dark urges of his animal nature are unleashed and regain the upper hand.

Nietzsche described civilisation as “a thin layer of apple peel over seething chaos”, and often enough this “peel” has failed to resist those atavistic drives and barbarianism has descended upon us. The crime of the Holocaust was committed in the land of poets and philosophers, by a people who were regarded as among the most cultivated in the world. After Auschwitz, after the genocides in Cambodia and Rwanda, after the unthinkable atrocities in the Balkans and elsewhere, one cannot but ask oneself: what is man, if he is capable of such horrific things?

Many people take refuge in cynicism. There is talk of a “failed creation”²; man has been called a “biological freak”³, an “evolutionary misfit”⁴; “a naked ape”⁵, “a product of chance”, “a gipsy” whose duties and destiny “have not been written down”⁶. He has been condemned as a “miscarriage of nature”⁷, as the ultimate “monster”⁸, in short, as a being which, weary of all utopias and visions of paradise, is about to turn the earth, the Garden of Eden, into a sea of debris, a

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¹ This article is based on a paper of a public talk presented by the author in 2001 in Stuttgart. For more on Bahá’í anthropology see Udo Schaefer, Bahá’í Ethics, vol. 1, pp. 40-59; 169-256.
² E. M. Cioran, Die verfehlte Schöpfung, Frankfurt am Main 1979
³ Arthur Koestler, Janus, pp.5, 100.
⁴ ibid.
⁶ Jacques Monod, Chance and Necessity, pp. 160, 167
⁸ This is the meaning of the word ‘Untier’ in the title of a cynical book on this subject: Ulrich Horstmann, Das Untier. Konturen einer Philosophie der Menschenflucht, Frankfurt 1985.
lunar desolation. Owing to its “constitutive deficiencies” \(^9\) the “monster” will, it is feared, bring about the destruction of its own species and all living things in a single final cataclysmic event. One may shudder at this shockingly negative utopia but the same basic idea was already evident in the writings of Schopenhauer, who called man “a hideous wild beast” \(^10\) and believed “that it would be better if we did not exist” \(^11\). The human sciences, those known as “anthropologies from below”, also see only the lower, destructive characteristics of the human race. They reduce man to his drives and see him as a being that is “Beyond Freedom and Dignity” \(^12\).

But this verdict is one-sided and therefore wrong. One must not blind oneself to the fact that man also has another, very different side to his character. Since he walked onto the stage, his genius has created works that will endure throughout the ages. In all cultures there have been individuals, spiritual leaders and trailblazers in the development of true humanity, who have guided mankind towards loftier realms. Man also has the potential to be an angelic being: “Wonders are many, and none is more wonderful than man”, says Sophocles \(^13\), and similar words in praise of man abound in world literature.

Like the ancient Roman god Janus, man has two faces, “two natures” \(^14\): “he has the animal side as well as the angelic side” \(^15\). He is ambivalent, capable of both good and evil. This ambivalence, the greatness and the vile baseness of man \(^16\), is a topic that has been dealt with at length by philosophers and poets and also in the sacred scriptures of the religions:

“No animal changes as often as he;
now soaring upwards, now sinking into abasement”,
says the Greek poet Menander \(^17\). An

“unfortunate being, midway between angel and beast”

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\(^9\) ibid. p. 10
\(^10\) Parerga und Paralipomena, vol. II, p. 211
\(^12\) This is the title of Skinner’s before-mentioned book (see footnote 5).
\(^13\) Antigone, verse 330
\(^14\) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 29:2
\(^15\) ibid. 64:2
\(^16\) “Everyone’s an abyss. You get dizzy if you look down” (Georg Büchner, Woyzhek, scene 10.
\(^17\) (342-291 v. Chr.)
is how he is described by a German poet.\(^\text{18}\)

The question as to man’s ultimate nature and the purpose of his existence — which Immanuel Kant calls the most important of the four fundamental questions of philosophy\(^\text{19}\) — extends into the realm of metaphysics. It cannot be answered by science, and even philosophical anthropology, which takes us a little further, does not provide any certain answers. Statements that go beyond what we are able to discern through experience and rational thinking are to be found in the sacred writings of the religions. Despite all the differences that exist in matters of detail, these answers from a transcendental source display remarkable similarities, even though the essence of man is not completely unveiled in them. According to Baha’u’llah, man is as inscrutable as the essence of God:

“Man is My mystery, and I am his mystery.”\(^\text{20}\)

He calls the human soul “a heavenly gem whose reality the most learned of men hath failed to grasp, and whose mystery no mind, however acute, can ever hope to unravel”\(^\text{21}\). Of all created things, it is man who is closest to God, because in the act of creation God has engraved on him His “image”.\(^\text{22}\) Therefore, “in him are potentially revealed all the attributes and names of God”\(^\text{23}\). Man is the ontological summit of the universe\(^\text{24}\); he is God’s representative\(^\text{25}\) and, as it is stated in the Qur’an, his “vicegerent (khâfsîyâ) in the earth”\(^\text{26}\). Created “to know Thee and to worship Thee”\(^\text{27}\), man is potentially “the most perfect of all created things”\(^\text{28}\) and “a mirror of His [God’s] own Self”\(^\text{29}\). He should purify himself from all transitory things, from all corrupt desires and passions and become a clear and polished “mirror” that can “reflect the glory of the names and attributes of


\(^{19}\) Kant’s Werke, Bd. IX: Logik, p. 25 (no English edition).


\(^{21}\) Baha’u’llah, Gleanings 82:1

\(^{22}\) “Therefore I created thee, have engraven on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty” (Baha’u’llah, The Hidden Words, Arabic 3).

\(^{23}\) Baha’u’llah, Kitâb-Ì-gân 107

\(^{24}\) ’Abdu’l-Baha’, Paris Talks 15:2; 29:1; 21

\(^{25}\) See Baha’u’llah, Gleanings 109:2

\(^{26}\) Qur’ân 2:30

\(^{27}\) As expressed in the short daily prayer

\(^{28}\) Baha’u’llah, Kitâb-Ì-gân 109; see also Baha’u’llah, The Hidden Words, Arabic 11, 13

\(^{29}\) Baha’u’llah, Gleanings 27:2
God."30 Man is endlessly perfectible and he is called upon to attain perfection, as set out in the Gospel of Matthew:

Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.31

He is called upon "to soar above the world of matter"32, "he should be free and emancipated from the captivity of the world"33, and free himself from the fetters of earthly existence34 so as to "gain the victory over your own selves (an-nafs al-ammara)"35, since the self is the source of all egotism, greed, hatred and suffering. The self "is the ego, the dark, animalistic heritage each one of us has, the lower nature that can develop into a monster of selfishness, brutality, lust and so on."36. A person can only attain true happiness if he succeeds in liberating himself from this "bondage"37 and his spiritual nature gains the upper hand, enabling him, at the hour of death, "to ascend, in the utmost purity and sanctity and with absolute detachment, to the throne of the Most High"38. God’s revelation is "the Source of his [man's] education"39. One of the names of God is "Al-Murabiyu'l-Akbar", the "Greatest Educator"40. Hence, the Manifestations are the “divine educators of mankind”:

the heaven of God’s Will . . . hath been sent down that which is the most effective instrument for the education of the whole human race.41

Man is not merely a highly developed animal. Through his power of reason, his rational, immortal soul, which is a “sign of God”42, he is on a higher level in the hierarchy of creation. He is the only created being that has a share in the spiritual world43, but he can only achieve his destiny, his salvation, under the Covenant of

30 See also Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 124:22-3
31 5:48; see also Leviticus 19:2
32 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Paris Talks 3:7
33 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Selections 227:20
34 "The heart is prone to evil" (see Qur'án 12:53), i.e. one's natural urges. Cf. Annemarie Schimmel, Mystical Dimensions in Islam, pp. 25, 112
35 See Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 7:10; Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 43:3
37 "Say: Deliver your souls, O people, from the bondage of self (nafs) and purify them from all attachment to anything besides Me" (Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 136:1; 45). For this struggle (known in Islam as the "great Jiha-d"), man requires divine assistance.
38 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 81
39 Ibid. 11:3; 7:13; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 3:7.
40 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 93:14.
41 Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets 7:13.
42 Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings 82:1, 6; 83:1; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 4
43 see 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions 64:2
God — that eternal Covenant that the prophets and messengers of God have continually renewed. Without divine revelation and guidance (hudâ), without “proper education” he remains “deprived ... of that which he doth inherently possess”. Revelation, “the true education” can overcome man’s ignorance about his true self, enlighten him and cause him to attain his “high destiny” and his “lofty ... station”.

Man must consciously decide to follow this pattern of life, and he has the freedom to do so. Whereas the animal is a “captive of nature”, man has been granted freedom. The determining characteristic of human existence and human dignity consists in man’s ability, irrespective of the prevailing biological and social conditions, to subdue his vital urges, to control and sublimate his impulses so that these imperfections become useful and “are transformed into human perfections”. He has the choice between right and wrong, the potential to do good or to do evil. This image of man is a verdict against the widespread delusion of innocence, the popular idea that nobody is responsible for anything, that it is only society or structures that are at fault, the secular dogma of the “good individual” being victimised by “evil society”.

Bahâ’u’llâh’s image of man does not concur with the naive, optimistic Enlightenment motto “Man is good!” He is only potentially good, but he is certainly not predestined to be good, with peace and happiness automatically ensuing if the right social conditions prevail. The idea that it is only “relations” that prevent the individual from being a “good person” — as expressed by Bertolt Brecht in his “Ballad of the Good Man” — is mistaken. Even in the best of all possible worlds man’s happiness and peace on earth are unattainable unless man turns around, transforms himself and, by the grace of God, rises unto that for which he was created.

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44 see Qur’ân 7:172.
45 Tablets 11:3.
47 Bahâ’u’llâh, Gleanings 101.
50 ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ, Some Answered Questions 29:7
52 In The Threepenny’s Opera, act 6, "The Threepenny Finale".
However, man is also not “framed out of ... crooked wood”\(^{53}\), he is not of a “fallen nature”, not fundamentally evil and corrupt. Adam’s fall from grace does not mean that man is inherently sinful. Each individual is born into the world in a state of complete purity, but his animal nature means that he is “prone to evil”\(^{54}\). Existentially he is a sinner (\(\text{\textbarthim}\)\(^{55}\)), because as long as he is still on the path towards his goal, which is perfection, he is always deficient compared with what he has the potential to become.

The ambivalence of the spirit of man is that “it is capable of the utmost perfection, or it is capable of the utmost imperfection”\(^{56}\). If his spiritual capacities are developed, he can become a “mirror” of divine perfection and “the most noble of the existing beings”. If these capacities of the spirit are neglected and “it acquires vices, it becomes the most degraded existence”\(^{57}\). The spectrum of human existence is extremely broad: with God’s grace man can be exalted and “raised above the angels”\(^{58}\), but he can also sink into depths of degradation “which the meanest of creatures have never reached”\(^{59}\). As Aristotle says, “Brutality is less bad than vice, but more fearful.”\(^{60}\)

The diabolical side of human nature\(^{61}\), \(\text{la bête humaine}\), the dark aspects of the world, are thus certainly not ignored.

The required way of life is a happy medium between ascetic rejection of the world\(^{62}\) and Baudelaire’s utopian vision of a life of “luxury, idleness and voluptuousness”\(^{63}\). Bahá’u’lláh’s image of man is incompatible with the idea that the purpose of life is the satisfaction of urges and enjoyment of pleasure,\(^{64}\) the

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\(^{53}\) Immanuel Kant, \textit{Religion within the Limits of Reason alone}, p. 92

\(^{54}\) Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Prayers and Meditations} 124:2

\(^{55}\) see Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Prayers and Meditations} 183:5, 11, 13

\(^{56}\) \textit{Some Answered Questions} 36:4

\(^{57}\) ibid. 36:4; 31:6; Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Gleanings} 101

\(^{58}\) Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Prayers and Meditations} 160:1; \textit{Qur’án} 19:57

\(^{59}\) Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Gleanings} 101; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, \textit{Paris Talks} 31:6; see also \textit{Qur’án} 95:4–5

\(^{60}\) \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} 1150a. See also Thomas Aquinas, \textit{Summa theologiae} II-II, q 64, a2, ad 3 (“\textit{Peior enim est malus homo quam bestia et plus nocet}\)."

\(^{61}\) Satan, symbolised by the serpent, is a metaphor for the attachment of the soul to the human world (see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, \textit{Some Answered Questions} 30:6).

\(^{62}\) Practising “asceticism” (\textit{al-riyadat ash-shaqq}) is prohibited for Bahá’ís (see Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Tablets} 6:37; Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Kitáb-i-Aqdas} 36; Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Epistle to the Son of the Wolf}, pp. 49f.). The idea of detachment (\textit{zuhd}), on the other hand, appears frequently in the Bahá’í scriptures (see Bahá’u’lláh, \textit{Kitáb-i-ijtihád} 141; 170; 213; 247 etc.).

\(^{63}\) \textit{Les Fleurs du Mal} (\textit{L’Invitation au voyage}) : « luxe, calme et volupté.»

\(^{64}\) The French mathematician and philosopher Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) sees diversion or entertainment as posing a danger for man: “Men spend their time in following a ball or a hare; it is the pleasure even of kings”\(^{8}\) (\textit{Thoughts}, no. 141). “The only thing which consoles us for our miseries is diversion, and yet this is the greatest of our miseries. For it is this which principally hinders us from reflecting upon ourselves, and which makes us insensibly ruin.
insatiable striving for material prosperity and luxury, the cult of the orgasm and the cult of Mammon; in short, the modern lifestyle which has infected the whole world and which is causing the sense of solidarity, people’s readiness to help each other, to wither and die out. A person who has — as the Qur’ān puts it — “made a God of his passions”65, and individuals who are so caught up in selfish desires that “like the bats of darkness, they lift not their heads from their couch except to pursue the transient things of the world”66, have, according to Bahā’u’llāh, failed to recognise the true purpose of their existence. The only lasting thing that man can attain here on earth is “love of God”67 and “a pure, kindly and radiant heart”68.

But when will deficient man69, who, like Goethe’s “sorcerer’s apprentice”, is no longer able to solve the existential problems of humanity, change for the better? The survival of mankind depends on a new ethic and a substantially new way of thinking. The longing for the renewal of man and human society70, the dream of a New Man71 is as old as the hills; it is a history of hopes and disappointments. The New Man expected by Christian eschatology at the Time of the End, has been proclaimed to be imminent again and again — by the philosophers of the Enlightenment, by Jean-Jacques Rousseau72, Friedrich Nietzsche and Karl Marx, by the Russian intelligentsia and the Latin American revolutionaries73 and by the New-Age movement. But the birth of this new man seems more questionable than ever, and the idea of the recreation of man through genetic engineering is no less of a nightmare than the human breeding programme promoted by the Nazis.

65 Qur’ān 45:24
66 Bahā’u’llāh, Kitāb-I-Qān 250
67 Gleanings 152.
68 Bahā’u’llāh, The Hidden Words, Arabic 1.
69 Alfred Weber has described him as the “fourth man”: he is de-humanised, faithless, intellectualised, mechanised and impersonal (Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie, pp. 416ff.).
70 Jean Servier, Der Traum von der großen Harmonie. Eine Geschichte der Utopie, Munich 1971; Martin Buber, Pfade in Utopia, Heidelberg 1950
73 Worthy of mention in this connection is, in particular, Ernesto Cardenal, the Nicaraguan priest, poet and revolutionary. In his speech upon being awarded the 1980 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade in the Paulskirche in Frankfurt am Main, he spoke of “el hombre nuevo”, the “new man”, who would come into being in Nicaragua.
Scientists who were searching for a new ethic and a new man\footnote{Grover Foley, “Sind wir am Ende? Amerikanische Zukunftsprognosen”, in: Frankfurter Hefte 10 (1971), p. 747.} came to the despondent conclusion that: “Compared with the task of changing the sons of Adam, the splitting of the atom seems like child’s play”\footnote{ibid.}. Bahá’u’lláh says that the only thing that "is endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change" is the new “Word of God”\footnote{Bahá’u’lláh, Gleanings 99.}. He promises mankind’s transformation in the fullness of time:

The day is approaching when God will have, by an act of His Will, raised up a race of men the nature of which is inscrutable to all save God, the All-Powerful, the Self-Subsisting. He shall purify them from the defilement of idle fancies and corrupt desires, shall lift them up to the heights of holiness, and shall cause them to manifest the signs of His sovereignty and might upon earth. Thus hath it been ordained by God, the All-Glorious, the All-Loving.\footnote{Suratu’l-Haykal, in The Summons of the Lord, 8.}

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\bibitem{ibid} ibid.
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